

Remarks at a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee
Native American Luncheon
March 9, 2000

Thank you all very much. Please be seated. I am delighted to be here today. It's wonderful to see many of you again, and some of you for the first time.

I want to thank Congressman Kennedy and Congressman Kildee for the work they have done to build bridges of cooperation and mutual effort with the tribes of our country.

I want to thank Dick Gephardt for being a truly outstanding leader of our party in the House of Representatives. You know, I'm not on the ballot this year. [Laughter] Most days, I'm okay with it. But when I vote, it will be along with a lot of other Americans whom I believe will make him the next Speaker of the House of Representatives. And it will be a good thing for America when he is, because he's an outstanding man.

I want to thank all the other Members who have come here today to be with you to express their support: George Miller from California, a long time champion of tribal causes; Maxine Waters; Jim Maloney; and Carolyn Maloney.

And I want to thank Nancy Keenan from Montana for running. I knew Nancy Keenan before she ever thought she'd be running for Congress, and way before anybody, including my mother, thought I'd ever be President. So I am delighted to see her here as a candidate. I can tell you, she is, I think, one of the most outstanding candidates we have anywhere in the United States. And she will profoundly enrich the United States Congress if she is elected, as I firmly expect her to be. And she's over there, wearing her "Jeannette Rankin for Congress" button to remind the people of her fellow State, her fellow Montanans, that it's been too long since a woman represented Montana to Congress.

I thank Bobby Whitefeather for the invocation. It was very moving.

Some of you who have visited me in the Oval Office have seen that in front of—there are basically three windows behind the President's desk. And the one directly behind my desk, I have a table on which I keep military coins. And the one just to the right of that is filled with a drum, an Indian drum made by a tribe

in the Southwest when we were debating the NAFTA treaty. And on the face of this drum, there is a Native American, a Native Canadian, and a Native Mexican. And then I have in the drums the eagle feathers I've received from various tribal leaders around the country and other gifts.

I now have a beautiful eagle-feather headdress I received just a couple of weeks ago and a pouch of tobacco which has great symbolic significance, as all of you know. I have a number of other things that I've collected from native peoples in other parts of the world to remind me that these challenges are present everywhere, a necklace made for me by a Native Hawaiian, a baobab nut carved for me by an Australian Aboriginal.

But I have kept the Native American presents in the Oval Office from the beginning of my Presidency for over 7 years now to remind me of my solemn obligation to respect the nation-to-nation relationship that I have done everything I could to nurture, to build up, and to honor.

In my private office in the White House—and every President's got a private office on the second floor of the White House, in different rooms—I have things that mean a lot to me personally. I have an old, old painting of Benjamin Franklin, to remind me of the importance of enterprise and effort and ingenuity, in private as well as public life. I have a picture of my friend Yitzhak Rabin, 10 days before he was killed. I have a picture of Robert Kennedy in Appalachia, to remind me of the obligations of the President to people who aren't so fortunate. And I have one of Edward Curtis' magnificent pictures, this one of a chief named Long Fox. And I look at it every night to remind me of my continuing obligation to keep working until we get this relationship right and until people who live in all of our Native American areas have a chance to live up to the fullest of their God-given abilities, as well.

So it's a great honor for me to be here today. In 1994, I invited all the tribal leaders to come to the White House to meet me, and I learned it was the first time that had been done since

James Monroe was President in 1822. And I was struck by the great good fortune that some tribes have found and by how wisely some of the tribes were investing the earnings that they were making from gaming enterprises. And I was struck that other leaders, literally, people in their tribes took a collection to make sure they could afford the plane ticket. And it reminded me again how very much we still have to do.

Now, we have, I think, a lot of hope in America today, but we also have a lot of work to do. That's the message I tried to get out at the State of the Union Address. One of the things that I've always loved about most of the wisest things I've read coming out of Native American tribes in every part of America is, there's this understanding of the fleeting nature of life and the intergenerational responsibilities we all have. And sometimes—about the only time Americans ever really get in trouble with our politics in this great democracy is when we're too focused on just this minute.

Sometimes if we happen to be mad, as you know, when people are really angry and they have to make a decision, they're more than 50 percent likely to do something wrong. If you're too obsessed with just this minute and you're really, really mad, you might make a mistake. And if you just look at this little slice of time and you're really, really complacent, you will also certainly make a mistake, because change is constant in human existence and human affairs and the life and times of a nation. So that's why I have tried to argue to the Congress and to our country that now is the time to meet the big challenges that America still faces.

And now is the time to meet the big challenges that Native Americans still face. For all the economic prosperity of some tribes, on some reservations the unemployment rate is still 70 percent. A third of American Indians and Alaska Natives still live in poverty and without decent health care. Indians are the victims of twice as many violent crimes. More than 80 percent of the people in Indian country aren't yet connected to the Internet, something which can make a big difference, which is why I ordered some Christmas presents from the Lakota craftspeople at Pine Ridge over the Internet last Christmas, to try to emphasize this as an important thing. There are many people who have found ways to make a living because of the

Internet, even though they're physically distant from the markets they must serve.

The dropout rate from high school of Native American children is still about one-third, and we've got it down; we got the graduation rate of the general population now up almost to 90 percent.

So we have to do something about this. That's why I wanted to highlight Indian country in my first new markets tour. I want to give Americans who have made money in this economy the same incentives to invest in the underdeveloped areas in America that we give them to invest in the underdeveloped areas of Latin America or Africa or Asia, not to encourage Americans to stay away from those places overseas but to look first to the people here at home who need work, who need education, who need technology, who need opportunity. And I think it's important.

I also asked in the State of the Union Address for the largest budget increase, nearly \$1.2 billion, for new and existing programs to assist tribal nations, and many of you mentioned that. I think that's important. And I think it's important that we do have bipartisan support for this, for which I am very grateful—to increase economic opportunity, health care, education, law enforcement; to more than double last year's funding to replace and repair schools on reservations, and to address the growing digital divide; to improve roads and bridges, public safety and health care; increase funding for law enforcement officers, and a substantial increase to the Indian health services. All this is very, very important.

I want to make three points. This is going to be a brief speech. Number one, I want you to help me pass the budget. It matters. And we do have some Republican support for it, which is good, and without it we can't pass it because we're still in the minority.

Number two, I want you to help me pass this new markets initiative, because ever since I've been President we have worked to try to empower the tribes of this country. As nearly as I can tell—I've spent a lot of time, since I was a little boy when I used to go to the Garland County Library in Arkansas, and I'd sit there for hours on end reading histories of the Native American tribes. I've tried to figure out what happened and what went right and what went wrong. And basically—I remember once I read this great biography of Chief Joseph

of the Nez Perce. That was in grade school; I still remember. And he made that incredible statement, "From this day I will fight no more forever." It was a noble, powerful thing. I still remember it; I was 8 or 9 years old when I read it.

But you made that pledge, and you got a bad deal, basically. You gave up your land and your mineral rights and all this, and the Government said that they would do certain things through the BIA to take care of you. And it's not good for people outside your own family and community to act like they're taking care of you. And besides that, usually people don't keep their word, because there's always something else they would rather spend the money on.

And so I say to you, I want this budget to pass, and it's important. But our real goal ought to be the fundamental empowerment of the Native American tribes in this country as envisioned by the Constitution, required by the Supreme Court. That is what I have worked for since the day I got here. And I want you to help me get as much done in the days I have left remaining to get this nation-to-nation relationship right in a way that will allow you all to be lifted up. It is about money but more than money.

The third thing I want to say is—because that's why we're here—this is a political event. The reason we don't fight in America, if you—in a way, we all, all of us citizens promised that we will fight no more forever—is that we have other ways of resolving our differences and pursuing our interests and manifesting our power. But we have to show up at the ballot box to do it.

And the truth is that while we will get some very good Republican support on this budget, and I'm grateful for that, and while there are some members of the other party in the Congress who have represented large numbers of you who have learned about this, and I'm grateful for them, our party has had a consistent, determined leadership position that goes from top to bottom throughout the entire United States Congress that we support the direction that you advocate. That's why you're here today. This is unprecedented. I am grateful for you for being here.

But this is about far more than financial contributions and money. This is about whether people will be organized and energized to go

out and vote, to recognize that when you lay down your weapons, you have to pick up your ballot; that this is not about anybody being taken care of, this is about the right kind of relationship, and it has to be one that focuses on empowerment.

I have been profoundly honored, more than any of you can ever imagine, to have had the opportunity to work with you, to learn what I have learned, to see what I have seen. And I hope I have made a difference. And I am determined to do everything I can, in every day I have left, especially with this new markets initiative, which does have good bipartisan support. But in the end, think about this: The only way we'll ever get this right is if all of you are determined to be heard, determined to vote, determined to speak, determined to educate, determined to be heard, determined to make real what was supposed to happen so long ago and didn't. That's why I think it is so important that you're here today. Your presence here today and your statement increases dramatically the chances that, at last, we will get it right.

When I was down in Selma last weekend celebrating the 35th anniversary of the civil rights march, I was researching the things that various people had said, trying to get ready for it. And I noticed something Martin Luther King said about the end of the whole legacy of slavery. He said, you know, "When finally African-Americans are freed, the white people will be free, too." And as a white southerner, I identified with that. And it's literally true for me. If that hadn't happened in the South, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton never would have been elected President of the United States.

But America still labors under the burden of the terms that we struck with the Native American tribes so long ago and the fact that the deal never worked out in a way that was fair to both sides and honorable. And in some ways, it was maybe doomed from the beginning to have problems. But now we're trying to get it right, and we've made all this progress in the last few years. That's the importance of your being here today. I want you to feel good about this.

And I want you to understand that the rest of us are getting a lot out of this. This is a part of our historical legacy we want to be proud of, and it will never be right until we get it right. You just remember, every time you come

to Washington, every time you lobby for something, every time you try to do something to empower your own people and to help them, you're doing something for the rest of us, too, because this is a country that's supposed to be founded on equal opportunity, equal justice, mutual respect, everybody having a chance, the belief that we all do better when we help each other. That's what this is all about.

So I hope you think I have done something for you. But believe me, I still remember the little boy I was in the library over 40 years ago. You've done a lot more for me, and I thank you. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:23 p.m. in the Phoenix Park Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Bobby Whitefeather, chairman, Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians of Minnesota.

Remarks at the One America Meeting With Religious Leaders March 9, 2000

The President. Thank you. Well, first of all, welcome to the White House. Welcome to this wonderful East Room, where Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis planned the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore parts of America no one had ever seen, to try to find an ocean that no one thought could be reached by land. In a way, we are here on an even grander expedition, to try to find a place in the human heart no one has ever seen, that many believe we cannot reach in this life. And so I thank you all for coming.

Thank you, Sandy, for your passionate and vigorous leadership. Thank you, Ben Johnson, for telling me that you like your job every day. [Laughter] I was afraid that I had given you an impossible job, you would only hear from people who were disappointed in us, and that you would quit on me. So I'm glad you're happy, and I appreciate you.

Thank you, Maria, for your leadership on this effort. And I want to thank the members of the administration who are here, who have been introduced. And Dr. Franklin and Judy Winston, thank you for being here. And I thank my good friend Congressman Amo Houghton for being here, for proving that this issue is not a partisan issue, and for being in Selma. Didn't we have a grand day Sunday—one of the great days of my life, and many of you were there.

I was thinking, when I was in Selma Sunday and we were walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, what an important role the faith community of that day had in the civil rights movement. And there was an elderly woman there who was 90 years old, who was telling me about

a rabbi who came to march with them. And I think it was Rabbi Heschel, but I'm not sure because she didn't remember, but I think that's who it must have been. And the rabbi had a very, very long beard, and she said, "You know, a lot of us thought God himself had come down to Earth to go with us."

I say that because even today, contemporary surveys show that the American people look to the faith community to lead us forward on this great journey. Some of you have a foot in both worlds, so to speak. I see my great friend Reverend and former Congressman Floyd Flake from New York out there. But all of you must have a foot in this world on this issue.

I also want to comment that if we had had a meeting like this 35 years ago in the White House and it had been a very inclusive meeting, there would have been probably—probably—African-Americans and Hispanics here, and European-Americans, maybe some Native Americans, although we were pretty tone deaf about that back then, and maybe—maybe—one Asian-American. And all the faiths represented here would have been Christians and Jews and maybe Native Americans.

Today we have a large number of Muslims; we have Buddhists here; we have Baha'i members here and perhaps many other faiths. I say that to make this point. I think you can make a compelling argument that getting this right in the United States and putting us in a position to play a role of leadership in the world is not just a racial and ethnic issue anymore; it is also inevitably a religious issue.